

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN

®

- 6 **The Problem of Santa's Lighthouse** / Edward D. Hoch
- 21 **Wild Things** / Clark Howard
- 39 **The Speck** / Isaac Asimov
- 46 **Natural Causes** / Dorothy Salisbury Davis
- 64 **Christmas Eve at Lulu's** / Ed Conrow
- 76 **The Dark Elf Master of Crack of Doom** / James Powell
- 102 **Flash Attachment** / Dell Shannon
- 116 **The Journey** / Jack Ritchie
- 122 **Beast at the Door** / Donald Olson
- 134 **The Price of Light** / Ellis Peters

- 93 **Mystery Newsletter** / R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner
- 99 **The Jury Box** / Allen J. Hubin
- 155 **Index to Volume 82**

Note: indicia on page 4

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a NEW short story by

JACK RITCHIE

A very different sort of story from Jack Ritchie, written shortly before his untimely and widely mourned death this past April . . .

THE JOURNEY

by **JACK RITCHIE**

It had been almost four months since Explorer III blasted off from this earth and now there was rioting in our streets.

My Minister of Order, Motanbee, was plainly worried. "Sir, last week alone there were three murders in Europe, five in Asia, and six in North America."

I drummed my fingers on my desk. Fourteen murders in one week. That was twice as many as we had on earth the entire last year.

"Society is disintegrating," Motanbee said. "Antisocial acts are spreading like wildfire. Mob action is sparked by the slightest of causes. There have been thousands of cases of physical assault. The malicious destruction of property and arson have risen to epidemic proportions. Sir, we are on the verge of anarchy."

I sighed. "Motanbee, can you think of any rational reason why the human race should not be blown to smithereens?"

He frowned reprovingly. "Sir, the human race must survive."

"Why?"

He smiled. "It is the basic instinct of all species to survive. And, after all, sir, you and I are human, too."

Yes, I reflected, we are all human on this earth and we still preserve the illusion that we have all remained equally so, though it is obvious to those who dare to face the truth that we have not.

I glanced at the clock. Another four long hours before I could retire to the eternity chamber for the day.

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Ah, yes, the eternity chamber. The Council of Ruling Elders rationed me to a mere eight hours each day. How I longed for more. Even twenty-four hours.

I glanced at Motanbee. He was an upper level, strata-three civil servant. His reward for a diligent day of service was one hour in the chamber, but I rather suspected that toward the end of that hour, he endured rather than enjoyed.

And what of those many beings out there on the surface of the earth? Those millions and millions of brother humans? I doubted very much if the great majority of them—had they been given the opportunity—could remain in the chamber for as much as ten minutes without pressing the panic button.

"Motanbee," I said. "Human beings are like sharks."

He blinked. "Like sharks, sir? Are you suggesting that they're voracious, deadly, predatory?"

"Of course they are, Motanbee. However, I wasn't thinking in those terms just now. I was thinking of motion. To keep living, the shark must keep in motion. Continuous, unending motion every moment of his damn life. If he stops moving, he drowns. He dies. Humans are like that, too, Motanbee. When they are not indulging in what they conceive to be purposeful activity—physical or mental—they fall apart. They drown. They die. They suffer from the dreadful compulsion to be useful."

Motanbee consulted his timepiece. "Sir, it's time for your daily communication with Explorer III."

I stifled a yawn. Yes, it was time to talk to the Explorer again. Explorer III. The triumph of our earth. The ultimate spaceship. The largest venture of any kind this earth had ever known. It had taken nearly seventy years to complete it.

Explorer III had finally blasted off this earth four months ago with 3,876 souls aboard. Its destination—Galaxy Septimal. Its mission—to measure another inch of the immeasurable universe.

I left my office and went down the corridor to Central Communications. I sat down before the viewer and time accelerator and in a moment Commander Ramske, Captain of Explorer, appeared on the screen.

He proceeded to give me his daily report, which did not really deviate essentially from yesterday's report or that of the day before. Finally he finished.

"In other words, Commander," I said, "everything aboard Explorer III is just peachy dandy?"

"Yes, sir."

"No riots aboard the Explorer? Murders, suicides, assaults?"

"No, sir. There are no problems at all aboard the Explorer. Everything is functioning perfectly and morale is high."

Of course, I thought. Your people are not treading water. They have a mission, a purpose, an objective. They are moving. They have a spaceship to play with and they have run away to explore another insignificant mote of the universe.

Ramske cleared his throat. "I understand, sir, that for some unknown reason, there seems to be trouble on earth."

"Yes, Commander," I said. "We are having some trouble." I terminated our conversation and returned to my office.

Motanbee was waiting with more bad news. "Sir, there seems to be a strong nationalistic movement growing in China. There is even talk of secession from the United Nations of the Earth. If something isn't done, it might lead to a bloody civil war."

"Damn it," I said, "I thought nationalism was a dead issue hundreds of years ago."

"Yes, sir. It was. But now that the Explorer has been completed and left earth, people just seem to have more time on their hands than they know what to do with."

My temper rose. "We have a completely comprehensive earth program of sports, hobbies, self-improvement courses, and the like. There isn't a soul on this planet who cannot participate in some activity at some level. Why the hell can't people behave themselves and enjoy this paradise on earth?"

"Sir, our computers show that in order for humans—*most* humans, that is—to remain mentally and physically healthy, they must work an average of two hours a day at something they consider important, necessary, and/or constructive. Useful. Otherwise they become quite restless, and this restlessness rapidly worsens until there is personal and social disintegration. Hobbies and sports are not enough. People must be kept busy, of course—but for at least two hours each day, their busyness must have a purpose other than just to while away the time."

"Why does anybody need a *purpose* to justify his existence? To exist is in itself quite sufficient."

"Perhaps to you, sir, and a few others." He sighed heavily. "Generations of men and women worked on Explorer III. It was a project so huge it enveloped the efforts of the entire world like a giant

spiderweb. Every soul on earth was in some way, directly or indirectly, involved in some aspect of the ship's creation. Explorer III was truly the only industry on earth with a creative purpose. But the completion and departure of Explorer III has left a void which cannot be filled. There's nothing left to occupy the minds, the hearts, or the souls of the people."

"All right," I snapped. "We'll build another damn space ship. Bigger and better. That ought to keep the earth busy for another seventy years."

Motanbee shook his head. "It wouldn't be quite the same, sir. Even an improved spaceship would really have no place to go except to follow in the path of Explorer III. And that makes the entire project basically purposeless. Non-creative, if you will."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Then what is the solution? What is necessary to occupy the earth's idle hands and idle minds now? What must we build?"

Motanbee spread his hands helplessly. "I don't know, sir. There seems to be nothing left. Perhaps there really is no solution."

But there was a solution. A temporary solution. I had known what it would have to be for nearly a month now, but I had hoped desperately that I would not have to make it.

But it was my decision, my responsibility, my duty. I could not put it off until my term as Ruler ended three years from now and let my successor worry about it—by then it would be too late.

Motanbee put a new report on my desk. "Sir, according to our projections, the crime rate will rise geometrically rather than arithmetically. Before the end of the year there will be at least six thousand murders."

"Motanbee," I said, "Get the hell out of here and let me think."

When he was gone, I sighed. Was the human race doomed to destroy itself because its intellect could not keep pace with its technology? Was there any point in fighting the inevitable? Must one keep trying to save the species? Buy more time? Must one scratch for another year, another century, another thousand years in the faint hope that the human situation would somehow improve?

Or would it be wiser, more intelligent, to yield to the looming catastrophe?

I finally shook my head. No. Motanbee was right. The instinct to preserve the species lingered, even in me.

I unlocked the top drawer of my desk and pulled out the Secret

Chronicle. Its existence and contents are known only to the President of the Council and his or her predecessors. When my term was up, I would pass it on to my successor.

I opened its pages and read again the history and fate of Explorers I and II, and the events which had transpired on earth after their blast-offs.

Yes, my duty was clear. It must happen again.

I left my office and strode purposefully back to Central Communications.

My eyes went to the almost inconspicuous row of numbered red buttons. They had been installed for the safety of this earth should Explorer III return to our galaxy with alien bacteria or any other form of life with which the earth could not cope. Only I had the authority to press them, if it proved necessary, and only I knew the sequence for activation.

I began pressing the buttons in their proper order.

When the impulse reached Explorer III, the ship and every one of the 3,876 humans aboard it would be blown to bits. Their deaths would be instantaneous and painless.

The act of killing them, of course, disturbed me greatly. But not nearly so much as the tragic *necessity* that it be done.

I returned to my office and waited.

Motanbee came to me eventually, his face white.

"I have bad news, sir. The worst news."

"By all means tell me," I suggested.

"The ship, sir. Explorer III. Communications with the Explorer have ceased entirely. There has been an accident, sir. Our instruments indicate that the ship has disintegrated. Totally disintegrated."

I waited until the news had been disseminated over the face of our globe and then I entered the broadcasting studio and sat down before the cameras. I waited for the signal and then began speaking.

"Citizens of earth, I come before you at this time to confirm the grave, the tragic news. All communications with Explorer III have ceased. Our instruments indicate that an accident has occurred. It appears that Explorer III has met the same fate as Explorers I and II."

I paused a few moments to let that sink in, and then continued.

"Citizens, no mere words of mine can express our government's feelings of shock and horror at the magnitude of this tragedy—the loss of the most magnificent spaceship this earth has ever produced.

Nor can I adequately voice our sorrow at the deaths of 3,876 of our finest men and women."

Glancing at the monitor, I saw that my face was properly grave. "However, citizens of earth, we must not now yield to the temptation of despair. The human spirit—the *indomitable* human spirit—must rise to the occasion. It must spring from the ashes with a new hope, a new dedication." I thought that my voice crescendoed nicely. "The human mind cannot be defeated. It will triumph again in this hour of catastrophe. It will once again face the galaxies, the universe itself, with a renewed courage and determination."

I stared purposefully into the center camera. "I have talked to our Minister of Construction and I have ordered that the building of a new spaceship be begun immediately. A new Explorer—bigger, better, finer than Explorer III." I paused for effect. "We cannot be defeated. I am depending upon each and every one of you to put his shoulder to the wheel. I ask you to gird your loins to the task ahead, to accept the challenge. Together, you and I, we cannot fail in this magnificent task assigned to us by the very universe itself."

When I finished my speech, I bowed my head humbly and waited until I was off camera.

I was immediately overwhelmed with congratulations and enthusiasm from the entire studio staff and my ministers.

Motanbee's eyes shone. "That was a tremendous speech, sir. And I assure you that you can count on me completely for the giant task ahead."

My eyes went over their faces. Yes, I could see it on everyone's countenance. There was a new life, a new purpose in the air and I had no doubts but that it was being repeated at this moment everywhere on earth.

There would be no more riots, no more killings, no more deadly moments of freedom. The earth once again had a purpose.

I broke away from the enthusiasm and went downstairs, past the guards, and entered a small cell. It was finally time for my eight hours in the eternity chamber.

I lay down on the pallet. The walls began absorbing the beat of my heart, the whisper of the blood moving through my veins. *This* was the adventure. The journey to the point of all dimensions. The search for Why.

I was getting closer and closer. One day I would touch it . . .